

Exploring the influence of recreational active tourism on happiness

A rekreációs célú aktív turizmus és a boldogság kapcsolata

Authors: Cem Yesilyurt¹ – Ali Bagdadi²

Growing global concerns regarding health, well-being and quality of life have reshaped tourism demand patterns. Recreational active tourism has emerged as an alternative tourism type, offering physical and psychological benefits to participants. This study aims to examine the relationship between recreational active tourism and happiness by synthesizing academic literature. Adopting a qualitative approach, the study is designed as a narrative literature review based on secondary data sources. Of 200 articles reviewed, 51 were selected for the final sample. The findings indicate that participation in recreational active tourism contributes to happiness and mental well-being by reducing stress, enhancing emotional balance, fostering social interaction and supporting self-actualization. The results further suggest that active tourism should be regarded as a supportive tool for public health, sustainable tourism development and quality-of-life enhancement.

Az egészség, a jóllét és az életminőség iránti világszerte növekvő figyelem jelentősen átalakította a turisztikai keresletet. A rekreációs célú aktív turizmus olyan alternatív turisztikai formává vált, amely egyaránt kedvező hatást gyakorolhat a résztvevők fizikai és lelki egészségére. A tanulmány célja, hogy a vonatkozó szakirodalom összegzésével feltárja a rekreációs célú aktív turizmus és a boldogság közötti kapcsolatot. A kvalitatív kutatás másodlagos forrásokra épülő narratív szakirodalmi áttekintés keretében valósult meg. A 200 áttekintett tanulmány közül 51 került be a végleges mintába. Az eredmények szerint a rekreációs célú aktív turizmusban való részvétel a stressz csökkentésével, az érzelmi egyensúly erősítésével, a társas kapcsolatok előmozdításával és az önmegvalósítás támogatásával járul hozzá a boldogsághoz és a mentális jólléthez. Mindezek alapján az aktív turizmus a közegészségügy, a fenntartható turizmusfejlesztés és az életminőség javításának hatékony támogató eszköze lehet.

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1. Introduction

Concerns related to health and well-being have become a dominant global trend in contemporary societies. Rapid industrialization and intensive urbanization have significantly altered daily life, exposing individuals to persistent stress, psychological pressure, and mental fatigue. As a response to these conditions, people increasingly turn to recreational activities as a means of restoring psychological balance and improving overall quality of life.

Previous research suggests that individuals attempting to adapt to modern urban lifestyles require systematic outlets for releasing accumulated tension in order to maintain psychological stability (FEATHER-SHAW 1999).

Within this context, leisure industries particularly tourism, recreation, and sport have expanded rapidly, offering structured opportunities for physical and mental regeneration. Despite the well-documented health benefits of physical activity, physical inactivity remains widespread and continues to increase globally (REICHERT et al. 2007). While time constraints are often cited as the primary barrier to participation in recreational physical activity, empirical evidence indicates that motivational deficits play

¹ associate professor, Adiyaman University, Turkey, cyesilyurt@adiyaman.edu.tr, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2193-5406>

² lecturer, University of Tokaj, bagdadi.ali@unithe.hu, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7684-896X>

a more decisive role than objective time limitations (REICHERT et al. 2007).

Consequently, participation in regular physical activity during adulthood has become increasingly common, a trend that is reflected in the growth of sport-related markets. One notable development within this transformation is active tourism, which refers to tourism experiences centered on physical activities performed in natural or semi-natural environments within a destination (ARAÚJO VILA et al. 2019). As individuals become more concerned with health, longevity, and life satisfaction, tourism experiences that integrate physical activity, nature, and personal fulfillment have gained strategic importance. Improvements in life expectancy and living standards have further encouraged individuals to seek self-realization through leisure, social interaction, and travel-related experiences (PÉREZ MUÑOZ et al. 2015).

While numerous studies have extensively examined the physiological benefits of physical activity particularly its role in cardiovascular health and disease prevention comparatively fewer studies have focused on its psychological outcomes within a tourism context. This literature review aims to address this gap by synthesizing existing research on the relationship between participation in recreational active tourism and individuals' mental well-being and happiness. Given that physical inactivity contributes not only to physical illness but also to declining levels of subjective well-being, understanding the happiness-enhancing potential of active tourism is of both academic and practical relevance. By highlighting the psychological benefits associated with active tourism participation, this study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on health-oriented tourism development.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research question: *Does recreational active tourism have an effect on subjective well-being?*

2. Active tourism

Growing global concern for health and well-being has significantly reshaped tourism demand patterns. Recent improvements in quality of life and life expectancy have encouraged individuals to pursue self-fulfillment across personal, social, and leisure-related domains. Within the framework of postmodern tourism, active tourism has emerged as a particularly relevant form of travel, catering to a new generation of tourists seeking novel, authentic, and multisensory experiences (FRAIZ et al. 2020).

Active tourism is commonly categorized as a sub-type of alternative or adventure tourism, alongside

ecotourism and special-interest tourism. Unlike mass tourism, it differs substantially in terms of organization, human resource requirements, and the nature of the tourism product offered. Active tourism involves a wide range of activities that require physical effort and, in many cases, a basic level of physical training. The increasing popularity of such experiences is closely linked to broader societal trends emphasizing health, fitness, and active lifestyles (ARAÚJO VILA et al. 2019).

According to the WORLD TOURISM ORGANIZATION (2014), one of the primary driving forces behind the growth of adventure and active tourism is the combined effect of urbanization and digitalization. These processes have intensified individuals' desire to reconnect with natural and cultural environments, prompting demand for authentic, experience-based tourism products. Since the 1990s, a new travel philosophy has evolved that integrates adventure, ecotourism, and cultural exploration. This approach commonly referred to as active tourism aims to combine recreation and education while generating benefits for both tourists and host destinations (IAȚU et al. 2011). In recent years, active tourism has attracted increasing attention as a strategy with the potential to promote physical activity among the general population. By integrating leisure time, interaction with the environment, and subjective well-being, this approach may contribute to the pursuit of physically active alternatives (PEREZ-ARANDA et al. 2021). Active tourism encompasses a broad spectrum of outdoor activities that require physical exertion, including hiking, cycling, water sports, and nature-based exploration (ARAÚJO VILA et al. 2019). Such activities are typically concentrated in rural or natural areas where the natural environment itself constitutes a core attraction (BUCKLEY 2010, FREDMAN-MARGARYAN 2014). One of the primary appeals of active tourism lies in the opportunity for direct interaction with nature, which may contribute to stress reduction and psychological renewal (ANNERSTEDT et al. 2010, VARGÁNÉ GÁLICZ-DÁVID 2024).

Empirical studies indicate that demand for nature-based recreational activities has increased significantly in regions endowed with rich natural resources (DAX-TAMME 2022). Participants in active tourism may be motivated by diverse factors, including relaxation, social interaction, and discovery (BICHLER-PETERS 2021). These motivations highlight the multifaceted nature of active tourism, positioning it not only as a form of physical activity but also as a broader recreational experience contributing to mental restoration and personal development.

3. Active Tourism and Happiness

Happiness represents a fundamental human aspiration and has become a central concept within the field of positive psychology. In contemporary academic discourse, happiness is frequently used interchangeably with psychological well-being, emphasizing individuals' subjective evaluations of life satisfaction, emotional balance, and personal fulfillment (DIENER 2000). Philosophical perspectives on happiness have long highlighted the importance of recreation, pleasure, and leisure activities as essential components of a balanced life. For instance, Hume conceptualized happiness as a state supported by humor, recreation, enjoyment, and relaxation (as cited in NODDINGS 2003).

From this perspective, participation in recreational active tourism emerges as a significant contributor to individual happiness. In modern societies, individuals place increasing value on how they utilize their leisure time, and participation in recreational sport and physical activities during free time has risen steadily. Engagement in recreational sports satisfies a wide range of personal needs, including physical health improvement, mental well-being, social interaction, personal skill development, creativity, work performance, and overall happiness (KARAKÜÇÜK 2008). Accordingly, sport and physical activity have evolved into socially valued practices due to their demonstrated benefits for both medical health and subjective well-being (SEIPPEL 2006).

Active tourism activities provide individuals with opportunities to escape cognitive fatigue and psychological overload associated with modern lifestyles. The relationship between leisure time and psychological needs is closely linked to how leisure is structured and experienced. When psychological needs remain unmet, stress intensifies and well-being deteriorates; conversely, when these needs are fulfilled through meaningful leisure activities, individuals experience enhanced happiness and emotional balance (AMMAN et al. 2010). This dynamic underscores the mental health significance of engaging in active tourism during leisure time.

Interaction with natural environments constitutes a particularly important dimension of active tourism experiences. PRETTY (2004) conceptualized three levels of human-nature interaction. The first involves passive exposure to nature, such as viewing natural landscapes through windows, television, or printed media. The second level includes incidental interaction with nature while engaging in other activities, for example cycling through natural surroundings or spending

time in a park. The third and most immersive level entails active participation in nature-based activities, such as gardening, hiking, running, or outdoor exploration. Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that all three levels contribute positively to mental health, with active engagement yielding the strongest psychological benefits (PRETTY 2004).

Theoretical frameworks rooted in self-determination theory further clarify the link between active tourism participation and well-being. According to DECI and RYAN (2000), the fulfillment of basic psychological needs autonomy, competence, and relatedness is directly associated with fluctuations in individuals' psychological states. Within this framework, need satisfaction functions as a mediating mechanism between activity participation and well-being outcomes. Empirical studies support this assumption, emphasizing that recreational activities enhance well-being primarily by satisfying underlying psychological needs rather than through physical exertion alone (NEWMAN et al. 2014). The relationship between active tourism, health, and subjective well-being should be considered within the broader conceptual framework of health-oriented tourism, where the boundaries between wellness, health tourism, and other tourism products require careful conceptual clarification (RUSZINKÓ-DONKA 2019).

Active tourism activities undertaken during leisure time possess significant potential to enhance overall quality of life (TORKILDSEN 2005). Recreational sports refresh individuals' mental attitudes, restore emotional energy, and positively reshape perspectives on life (JENNINGS 2007). These outcomes align closely with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, particularly with the upper-level needs associated with self-actualization. Recreation enables individuals to satisfy physiological needs through movement while simultaneously strengthening social bonds, fostering creativity, and facilitating personal growth (SEVIL 2012).

Self-actualization, positioned at the apex of Maslow's hierarchy, refers to realizing one's full potential and experiencing life in a meaningful and fulfilling manner. Recreational and active tourism activities closely correspond to this objective, as they provide environments in which individuals can explore personal limits, develop competencies, and experience intrinsic satisfaction (KARAKÜÇÜK 2008). Consequently, participation in active tourism may be interpreted not merely as a leisure choice but as a mechanism supporting holistic well-being and long-term happiness.

The physical and psychological health benefits of active tourism have been discussed. However, it should be noted that, while many people adopt sedentary lifestyles and remain physically inactive, others may participate in active tourism activities and experience temporary improvements in psychological well-being without sustaining an active lifestyle. Thus, the concept of “motivation” becomes particularly important. For individuals to adopt an active lifestyle and continuously improve their physical and psychological health, they need high levels of motivation. Evidence from Hungary further indicates that active tourism participation is shaped not only by travel habits and previous experiences but also motivations; therefore, motivational factors should be considered when evaluating the long-term well-being effects of active tourism (MÁRTONNÉ MÁTHE–CSÁSZÁR 2019).

VALLERAND et al. (1987) distinguish two main types of motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to engagement in sport for pleasure and enjoyment. Whereas extrinsic motivation refers to participation to obtain tangible benefits, such as financial rewards or social prestige (VALLERAND–LOSIER 1999). According to Self-Determination Theory, types of motivation vary according to the degree of self-determination underlying behaviour (PELLETIER et al. 1998). These can be classified into three broad categories: intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation.

Individuals who are intrinsically motivated are highly motivated and are more likely to continue participating in recreational sports through active tourism. In contrast, individuals with extrinsic motivation are generally considered to be less self-determined (DECI-RYAN 1985, PELLETIER et al. 1998). These three dimensions of motivation are arranged along a continuum, ranging from a lack of regulation to fully internalised regulation. Intrinsic motivation refers to initiating an activity that is inherently interesting without feeling externally compelled or pressured, and with a full sense of choice (DECI-RYAN 1989). Individuals with intrinsic motivation have an internal desire to improve their competence in the activities they undertake and possess the ability to regulate their own behaviour in order to achieve success (SOYER et al. 2010).

Although intrinsic motivation is important, individuals cannot always act solely on this motivation. Therefore, the following section addresses extrinsic motivation. In contrast to intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation refers to performing an activity not for its inherent value, but to achieve a particular outcome (PELLETIER et

al. 1995). At the least autonomous level behaviour is externally regulated. Individuals engage in such behaviour in response to an external demand or to obtain an anticipated reward (RYAN–DECI 2000b).

According to deCHARMS (1968), when individuals perceive their behaviour as externally regulated, they generally do not internalise it and may become alienated from it (KINDAP TEPE 2011). For example, if an individual participates in recreational cycling because family members pressure them to lose weight, they may not adopt the activity as their own and may become alienated from it. Consequently, externally motivated individuals may not continue active tourism and, therefore, may be unable to sustain its physical and psychological benefits. Amotivated individuals, may not participate at all because they lack the motivation to do so.

Governments and policymakers seeking to encourage active tourism to improve physical and psychological health should not overlook motivation. They should avoid relying on coercion or external pressure. Instead, they should encourage people to internalise and voluntarily adopt active tourism, thereby fostering intrinsic motivation.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach and is designed as a traditional narrative literature review using a structured synthesis of relevant academic literature. A comprehensive literature review was conducted between 10 October 2025 and 15 November 2025 across the Cochrane Library, PubMed, ScienceDirect, Web of Science, EBSCOhost, Embase/Elsevier, and Google Scholar. Combinations of the keywords “active tourism,” “recreation,” “happiness,” “well-being,” and “quality of life” were used. Priority was given to recent publications, while studies published before 2010 were included only if they constituted seminal works or key primary sources. Of the 200 articles identified through the database searches, 51 were selected for the final review based on their relevance to the research topic and the stated publication criteria.

The literature review followed a structured synthesis approach, aiming to integrate studies directly related to recreational active tourism and happiness. The analysis focused on recurring theoretical perspectives, empirical findings, and conceptual relationships within the existing literature. Peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and institutional reports were considered based on their relevance to the psychological,

social, and health-related outcomes of active tourism participation.

Following selection, the studies were reviewed and synthesized. Particular attention was given to theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and key findings addressing the relationship between physical activity, leisure participation, and subjective well-being. Thematic synthesis was conducted through an inductive coding process. Recurrent concepts, findings, and theoretical explanations related to active tourism and happiness were identified and coded. Similar codes were grouped into broader categories, from which four overarching themes emerged: (1) physical activity and psychological well-being, (2) nature connection and psychological restoration, (3) social connectedness and community experience, and (4) autonomy, competence, and self-actualization. These themes were not predetermined but emerged from recurring patterns across the literature.

5. Findings and synthesis of the literature

5.1. THEME 1: PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AS A PATHWAY TO PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

The reviewed literature consistently indicates that physical activity embedded within active tourism contributes positively to subjective well-being. Participation in activities such as hiking, cycling, trekking, and other forms of outdoor recreation is associated with reduced stress, improved emotional balance, enhanced positive affect, and stronger psychological resilience. Unlike sedentary leisure activities, active tourism involves bodily movement and physical exertion, thereby supporting both physical health and psychological well-being.

Sustained participation in physical activity has been widely recognised as an important determinant of health throughout the life course (ARAÚJO VILA et al. 2019). In the context of active tourism, physical activity appears to generate benefits not only through improvements in fitness but also through its restorative and emotionally rewarding effects. The literature suggests that the happiness-enhancing potential of active tourism is partly explained by the outcomes of regular physical activity, including healthier lifestyle practices, stress reduction, and improved emotional functioning.

Synthesis. The evidence suggests that the contribution of active tourism to happiness extends beyond recreational enjoyment. Physical participation constitutes a central mechanism

through which individuals may experience improved mental well-being, emotional balance, and life satisfaction.

5.2. THEME 2: NATURE CONNECTION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL RESTORATION

A second recurring theme concerns the role of natural environments in promoting psychological restoration. Active tourism typically occurs in natural or semi-natural settings in which individuals directly interact with landscapes, ecosystems, forests, mountains, coastal areas, and other outdoor environments. Previous studies indicate that these interactions may reduce mental fatigue, facilitate emotional recovery, and enhance overall well-being.

The psychological benefits of nature-based tourism appear to be particularly strong when tourists actively engage with the environment through activities such as hiking, cycling, walking, camping, and outdoor exploration, rather than merely observing nature passively. Meaningful engagement with natural environments can promote psychological restoration while also strengthening individuals' sense of connection with nature. Recent tourism research similarly identifies nature affiliation and nature connectedness as important mechanisms through which tourism experiences can influence well-being.

Synthesis. The literature demonstrates that active tourism may enhance happiness not only through physical movement itself, but also through immersion in natural environments. Nature therefore represents a key contextual factor that can amplify the well-being outcomes associated with active tourism experiences.

5.3. THEME 3: SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS AND COMMUNITY EXPERIENCE

The reviewed studies emphasise that active tourism can facilitate social interaction and strengthen interpersonal relationships. Participation frequently takes place in groups, clubs, guided tours, outdoor communities, or community-based tourism settings. These contexts create opportunities for social support, shared experiences, cooperation, and a sense of belonging.

Social interaction can contribute to emotional well-being by reducing feelings of isolation and increasing individuals' perceived connectedness with others. Shared tourism experiences may also strengthen travel companionship and create meaningful connections with local people and communities. Such social dimensions indicate

that active tourism has both recreational and relational value, reinforcing its multidimensional contribution to subjective well-being. Research on tourist well-being identifies travel companionship, interaction with local people, and affiliation with nature as central aspects of visitors' well-being experiences.

Synthesis. The evidence suggests that the happiness outcomes of active tourism are partly social in nature. Shared experiences, social support, and interpersonal connections constitute important pathways through which participation in active tourism may enhance subjective well-being.

5.4. THEME 4: AUTONOMY, COMPETENCE, AND SELF-ACTUALISATION

The final theme emerging from the literature concerns personal development and psychological need satisfaction. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory, active tourism may satisfy three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Participants often choose activities voluntarily, develop new skills, overcome physical or psychological challenges, and experience a sense of achievement.

Active tourism can support autonomy because individuals often select destinations, activities, levels of challenge, and participation patterns according to their own preferences. It can foster competence enabling participants to acquire and improve skills, such as hiking, cycling, navigation, climbing, or outdoor survival. Relatedness may be fulfilled through interactions with travel companions, local communities, guides, and natural environments. Research in adventure and nature-based tourism has similarly identified the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, relatedness, and nature connectedness as mechanisms associated with both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being.

Furthermore, active tourism is closely related to Maslow's concept of self-actualisation because it can provide opportunities for personal growth, self-discovery, challenge, reflection, and the realisation of individual potential. These experiences may move the benefits of active tourism beyond short-term pleasure and contribute to more enduring forms of psychological well-being.

Synthesis. The literature indicates that active tourism may contribute to happiness by satisfying core psychological needs and supporting personal development. This mechanism extends beyond temporary enjoyment and may promote more sustainable forms of subjective well-being.

5.5. INTEGRATED FINDINGS

The thematic synthesis indicates that recreational active tourism can influence subjective well-being through four interrelated mechanisms: physical activity, nature connectedness, social interaction, and psychological need satisfaction. These mechanisms should not be understood as independent processes. Instead, they may operate simultaneously and reinforce one another.

For example, a participant who joins a guided cycling tour in a natural setting may benefit from physical exercise, restorative exposure to nature, interaction with fellow participants, and a sense of competence gained through completing a challenging route. In this respect, active tourism represents a multidimensional experience rather than merely a form of physical recreation.

The reviewed literature also suggests that happiness and well-being cannot be adequately explained by economic indicators, such as income or material prosperity, alone. Non-material dimensions – including psychological health, emotional balance, meaningful leisure, social connectedness, and opportunities for self-development – are increasingly recognised as significant components of subjective well-being. Within this broader perspective, recreational active tourism emerges as a potentially important contributor to both physical and psychological health.

6. Implications for research, practice, and policy

The findings suggest several implications for future research, tourism management, and public policy. Future studies should move beyond descriptive assessments of active tourism participation and examine the mechanisms through which active tourism affects subjective well-being. In particular, research should investigate the mediating roles of psychological need satisfaction, nature connectedness, social interaction, and motivation. Longitudinal designs and mixed-method research would be especially valuable for examining long-term well-being outcomes and possible causal relationships.

From a practical perspective, destination managers and tourism providers should design active tourism products that emphasise not only physical participation but also emotional, social, and experiential value. Guided nature-based activities, opportunities for community interaction, skill-building experiences, and reflective elements may strengthen tourists'

psychological benefits and overall satisfaction. Positioning active tourism as a well-being-enhancing experience, rather than solely as an adventure-oriented product, may further increase its appeal and societal relevance.

At the policy level, integrating active tourism into public-health and sustainable-tourism strategies may offer a promising direction. Policymakers can support infrastructure that enables safe, inclusive, accessible, and environmentally responsible participation in nature-based physical activities, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas. Educational initiatives aimed at local communities may also increase awareness of the health, social, environmental, and economic benefits associated with active tourism. Such initiatives may strengthen local support, destination loyalty, and long-term sustainability. The model (Figure 1) illustrates that recreational active tourism contributes to happiness through four mediating mechanisms: physical activity, nature connectedness, social interaction, and psychological need satisfaction (autonomy, competence, and relatedness). These mechanisms collectively enhance subjective well-being, which ultimately leads to higher levels of happiness.

Figure 1

Conceptual model of the relationship between recreational active tourism and happiness



Source: authors' own elaboration

7. Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, as a narrative literature review, the study does not follow the strict inclusion and exclusion procedures of a fully systematic review. Consequently, the selection and interpretation of sources may be influenced by researcher judgment despite efforts to include a broad range of relevant literature. Second, the synthesized findings are based on previously published studies and therefore do not allow

causal conclusions to be drawn regarding the relationship between recreational active tourism and happiness. The study identifies associations and recurring patterns reported in the literature rather than direct cause-and-effect relationships. Third, active tourism encompasses a diverse range of activities, including hiking, cycling, adventure sports, and water-based recreation, whose effects on well-being may vary substantially. Furthermore, cultural, geographical, and regional differences, as well as participant characteristics such as age, gender, and motivational orientation, may influence the outcomes reported in previous studies. Future research employing systematic review methods, meta-analyses, and longitudinal empirical designs would provide a more comprehensive understanding of these variations. Future studies should also examine whether the happiness-enhancing effects of active tourism differ across demographic groups, levels of experience, and motivational profiles.

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